

Sarawak Cuisine: An Overview and Its Identity

Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts (JTHCA)
2020, Vol. 12 (3) pp 15-30
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UITM Press
Submit date: 18th June 2020
Accept date: 04th December 2020
Publish date: 28th December 2020

Christopher Wan Sageng

Mark Kasa

Joseph Martin Pudun

Nursyafiqah Ramli

UCSI University Malaysia

christopherwan@ucsiuniversity.edu.my

Proposed citation:

Sageng, C.W., Kasa, M., Pudun, J.M. & Ramli, N. (2020). Sarawak Cuisine: An Overview and Its Identity. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, 12(3), 15-30

Abstract

It is without a doubt that gastronomic tourism is merging as one of the famous tourist areas of study. However, little research has been conducted on ethnic food and tourism in Southeast Asia. In particular, there is a lack of information in regards to Sarawak cuisine. This field survey was conducted whereby three of each popular local food joints were selected in each of the four districts of Sarawak (Kuching, Sibul, Mukah and Ba'Kalalan) which representative from four categories (customer, cooks, owner of the stalls and representative of professional chefs from Kuching Chefs Association) were selected. Unstructured in-depth interviews conducted with the Chefs, and all data were analysed using content analysis. The results show that almost all of the representatives utilised the same ingredients to prepare the foods and the cooking process and the technique similar from one another. Hence, Sarawak ethnic cuisine the ingredients, cooking process and practice must be accepted and integrated by the peoples. This present study would have an ideal way to prepare the Sarawak ethnic cuisine in the traditional way to maintain the distinctive and yet unique flavour of Sarawak.

Keywords:

Sarawak ethnic cuisine; preparation methods; food tourism; traditional

1 Introduction

Based on previous research conducted, it clearly indicated that food tourism is one aspect that contributes to a massive impact on countries' economies (Langgat, Salehuddin, Zahari, & Mansor, 2011). Tourists who travel regardless of leisure or work purposes will need to eat and drink (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2009). Furthermore, as asserted by Richards and Hjalager-Anne (2002), a vast proportion of most tourist experience, aside from other tourism product, are majority spent on consuming food and drink, or deciding where and what to consume and consider food and drink as one of the most vital elements of travelling. Besides, as asserted by Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2014), to conclude that food is part of a necessity for all, it forms part of travellers' daily practice. Furthermore, according to Palupi and Abdillah (2019), food is one of the main facets of hospitality and tourism experience. It is part of the essential human need, but it also expresses the respective community's tradition (Palupi & Abdillah, 2019). Thus, it's necessary to sustain each ethnic cuisine in each country to maintain its uniqueness and retain sustainable food tourism.

Based on Langgat et al. (2011), ethnic food is simple can be defined as a product that a particular ethnic (racial, national) or cultural group favour such as Mexican, Indian, Chinese, Losher and many others (Langgat et al., 2011). As asserted by Idris and Latif (2014), ethnic food refers to the expression of food in terms of value, attitudes, behaviours and belief of a culture that expresses its cultural heritage, religion or national origin. Thus, ethnic food as food or nourishment is derived from a collection of heritage, culture, legacy, and history by utilising available information and knowledge resources (Kwon, 2015). The local ingredients were also integrated into the cooking process, which gives the unique exotic tagline of the food's origin. Thus, the ingredients' origin also assembles the widely available foods in certain regions in Sarawak. Therefore, this study was conducted based on Ethnic in Sarawak's particular area, as highlighted in the study. For instance, the Senamu is one of the finest cuisines of the Lun Bawang Ethnic residing at the Northern part of Sarawak. Therefore it represents the regional area, the tribe and the standardisation of the method of preparation of the Ethnic food.

This could be an essential platform to attract more incoming foreign tourist to consume Sarawak cuisine. Up to date to the researcher knowledge, there are not known study been conducted to validate the cooking process nor technique applied and ingredients used in Sarawak ethnic foods. Hence, this study aims to pen down the standardisation of methods for preparing Sarawak Ethnic Food. This is also supported by Langgat et al. (2011). There is no indefinite standard for preparing Sarawak Ethnic cuisine. It will gradually blemish each native's group culinary heritage and directly affect the state tourism landscape. It will also affect young and later generations of Sarawakian that might not know the traditional way of preparing their Ethnic dishes. Therefore, this study aims to give definite answers and fill up the research gaps through qualitative research approach.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Sarawak

Within Malaysia's scope, the state of Sarawak is one of the most well-known states that are truly diverse in terms of its religion, culture, and tradition from a wide range of ethnic groups. Sarawak, also known as Land of the Hornbills, is one of the two states in Malaysia situated in the tropical island of Borneo (Langgat et al., 2011). This Land Of Hornbill is surrounded by a large perimeter of tropical rain forest separated from the Indonesia Kalimantan by ranges of high hills and mountain (Langgat et al., 2011). That's is the main reason of Sarawak being the most diversify and unique state within Malaysia as asserted by Langgat et al. (2011), the uniqueness of Sarawak are well depend on it ethnic groups as every native group has their lifestyle, tradition, dialects, language, culture and cuisine as well. This particular state is popular among Malaysians and popular among international tourists due to a wide range of cultural diversity through over 30 ethnics or indigenous or native groups (Attila, 2007). In the term of cuisine, all the native's possess the unique treasure of food (Langgat et al., 2011). Based on all previous research conducted in food studies, food may be recognised as being expressive identity, culture, and integral component of cultural and heritage tourism (Cusack, 2007; Jacinthe Bessière, 1998). Therefore, it is safe to mention that food may represent cultural identities, especially for the native group in Sarawak with each ethnic has its own story of their delicacies.

2.2 Ethnic Food

Ethnic food can be defined as food or nourishment originating from a gathering of legacy, heritage, and culture which utilises its information and knowledge of resource where it includes the elements of local ingredients based on animal or plant are accumulated, understood, and made into the tradition (Ting, Tan, & John, 2017). It is described as a traditional food that represents a particular ethnic group (Hiram, Ernest, Jun, & Francis, 2016). Furthermore, based on Richards and Hjalager-Anne (2002) notion, food, in particular, has been used to supporting identities because what we eat is the fundamental aspect of our culture. Based on Omar, Syed, Ning, Vagenas, and Ali (2019), local ethnic food termed as "speciality" or "locality" at specific destination becomes an iconic product which creates a unique feeling in the context of tourism experience of tourist in a particular destination. Food as an integral part of many tourism marketing and development strategies and some tourist destinations continue to exploit some famous and reputable food outlets for quality food and try to take advantage of "cultural value" of the foods that can be utilised as a marketable tourist commodity. The connections between food and tourism are thus supported by various government agencies, who seek the economic benefits of food tourism, in areas without a clear culinary identity, which is often seen as a catalyst for rural development capable of boasting local farm production (Cohen & Avieli, 2004).

According to Mohd et al. (2020), many researchers argued that culture society and identities could be understood by examining food. Therefore, in that sense, food is one

of the most cultural identities for each respective natives' group in Sarawak as each ethnic has its delicacies. In Sarawak's context, it comprises a various race such as Malay, Iban, Bidayuh, Chinese, Melanau, Orang Ulu and others ethnic group where each of the present ethnic group has their culinary delight (Nading, 2015) as each ethnic group has their styles of preparing, preserving, cooking and eating of food (Langgat et al., 2011). For instance, the Iban is popular with "tubu" (stems), "tuak" (an alcoholic beverage made from rice wine) and "pansuh" (meat cooked with Bamboo), the Melanau with "tebaloi" (Sago palm crackers), "sagu" (extracted from Sago's palm) and "umai" (raw fish mixed with lime juice) and Orang Ulu is well known with "garam barrio" (Highlands salt), "kikid" (broth), "tengayen" (local young leaves), and "urum giruq" (pudding) and as for the Malay "kek lapis Sarawak" (layered cake of Sarawak) (Mohd et al., 2020). The foods mentioned is one of the famous ethnic dishes in their respective culture and during festive. In turn, these food treasures have contributed to the uniqueness of Sarawak gastronomic culture (Mohd et al., 2020). These multitudes of cuisines have much to offer to food lovers, domestic tourists, and international tourists. The abundance of ethnic cuisine varieties that Sarawak offers can be part of the strategy to attract tourists to visit Sarawak in 2019 (Quan & Wang, 2004).

3 Methodology

3.1 Method and Materials

For this purpose of this study, there are two approaches been utilised to gather the data. First, a field survey was conducted where three popular local food joints were selected in each of Sarawak's four districts. The survey locations included Kuching, Sibu, Mukah and Ba'Kalalan. In each district, a representative from each community was selected to partake and contribute to this study. In this collaborative study, respondents from four categories were selected, viz, customer, cooks, owner of the stalls and representative of professional chefs from Kuching Chefs Association to validate the cooking process and technique. A small-scale test has been conducted, and there was no major issue with the validity nor reliability in the pilot study results. Thus, all the questions to be used confidently.

The respondents are in a pattern in which 1 number was customer, one was the cook, one was the owner, and one was the Kuching Chefs Association chef. An informal interaction approach has been implied to maintain the composure between the respondents and the survey team. Information was also collected and documented based on direct observation. Hence, 48 respondents were covered. Detailed information was collected on the different popular traditional ethnic food product of the districts and preparation method. The socioeconomic values and the traditions attached to each of the product were also covered, and the finding was documented accordingly. Secondly, to complement the first approach, in-depth interview is used as data collection methods to obtain the informants' answers. In this qualitative study, the "content analysis" method has been utilised to identify, concluding the categorise and structure from the rich text content (Wang, 2018). The data sets were thus rich, and the

conversations (professional chefs) took times varying from about 30 minutes to 50 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed after all of the interviews were done. Twelve respondents with age older than 20 years old and currently working as a Chef for at least five years were chosen by the researchers using a purposive sampling method. The sample size of 12 is considered appropriate for this study (Ryan & Cave, 2005) who mentioned is typical in qualitative studies. The Chefs are firstly approached and invited to participate in the study. All of the informants gave their agreement to participate, and their personal information was kept confidential.

To overcome the overly subjective issue (MacQueen et al., 1998) in the second approach of this study, intercoder reliability test was conducted (Carey et al., 1996). The transcribed interview was examined, and the three coders' behaviour for 12 agreement matrices was calculated using the agreement's ratio to disagreement (Kurasaki, 2000). Thus, the confidence level was enhanced as the theoretical conclusion derived by analysing the rich text and considered valid (Kurasaki, 2000). Some of the interview questions were used as follows: "What is the cooking process for Sarawak ethnic foods?" (to obtain the cooking process for each menu listed); "What are the cooking techniques for Sarawak ethnic foods?" (to obtain the cooking techniques for each menu listed); "What are the cooking ingredients for Sarawak ethnic foods?" (to obtain the cooking ingredients for each menu listed)". Field experts then reviewed the questions on its language, wording and relevance. All interview questions were made in three languages – English, Malay language, and Sarawakian language based on the informants' language preferences. During the interview, the probing technique was also used to explore further the informants (Jensen & Laurie, 2016). Thus, the method utilised was deemed to be relevant for this research study.

4 Result and Discussion

4.1 Demographic

The interview's finding derived from the total of 12 interviews conducted, it can be highlighted several clues regarding the cooking process/technique and local ingredients: the majority were male (77.63%). At the same time, the female was 22.37% of the total. Their age ranged from 25 to 60 years old being that the most representative was situated between 37-59 years old. Meanwhile, the level of educational qualifications identified was Diploma (33.33%), bachelor's degree (19.04%), Foundation (28.57%), and 14.22% were without any college degree holder. It is also important to note that all the interviewed respondents have lived in Kuching for at least five years to ensure the Sarawak ethnic foods' knowledge depth.

4.2 Ayam Pansuh

"Ayam Pansuh" is one of Sarawak's most well-known delicacies as it may be considered the food icon for the state. Ayam Pansuh means a chicken which is braised in Bamboo over an open fire. In the older days, there is a little luxury of having appropriate cooking utensil. Thus, the Iban ethnic group uses any natural resources to use as cooking tools and food sources. Therefore, they have used a bamboo act as a pot for them to fill it with any raw meat item, vegetables and a little water to cook their meal. It is a straight forward cooking method with the enhancement of natural flavour from the fresh ingredients, making the dish so fragrant and flavourful. There are only a few mandatory ingredients required to prepare: meat items, tapioca leaf and water. One of the main reasons this dish is unique is mainly due to the unique flavour in which extracted from the bamboo and tapioca leaf. Usually served during Gawai Festivals but it is widely available daily nowadays. The ingredients include any type of meat (Chicken, Pork, Fish), Tapioca Leaf, Bamboo, Ginger, Lemongrass, pepper and salt.



Figure 1: Ayam Pansuh, chicken cooked in Bamboo

For the preparation of Ayam Pansuh, chicken is first chopped into small pieces and put it in the Bamboo. Slice the ginger and rough pound the lemongrass to infuse the flavour and put everything in the Bamboo together with the chicken. Pour in water to cover the chicken surface and cover the end of the Bamboo with the tapioca leaf. The tapioca leaf will act as the cover to ensure the steam produce during the cooking process are circulated within the Bamboo. Then, place the Bamboo over an open fire and continuously rotate the Bamboo to avoid burning. Once its cook, pour the chicken mixture into a bowl and season well.

4.3 Umai

Umai is unique in Sarawak, especially in Mukah and Dalat, where many Melanau populations. Umai has initially been a food of convenience for Melanau fishermen on fishing trips to the sea. Traditionally, umai is thinly sliced raw fish marinated with 'assam paya', sour fruit of a wild palm or lime juice, onions, chillies, and salt pinch. It was an ideal recipe for the fishermen as it would have been inconvenient and dangerous to cook anything in their boats. The method of preparation is similar to the Peruvian ceviche, where the seafood is marinated in citrus. Both umai and ceviche require no physical cooking, the citrus (in this case lime) does the "cooking" - the citric acid causes the protein in the seafood to become denatured, the same way as heat does. Watched as the fish turn from a translucent pinkish to white in a matter of minutes. Today, umai is on the menus of posh restaurants and is often the piece de resistance of dinners and lunches. The ingredients include Fish flesh (Sea-based fish), onion, red chilli, shallot, lime Juice/Calamansi Juice, ginger, salt and sugar.



Figure 2: Umai

Slice the fish, red chilli, shallot and onion thinly and evenly. Then julienne the ginger. Squeeze the lime juice and dilute the salt and sugar. Once the mixture of the lime juice, salt and sugar has been diluted, pour the liquid mixture into a bowl together with all the ingredients. Stir all together and marinate for approximately 15 minutes to 20 minutes.

4.4 Senamu'

The Lun Bawang were traditionally peasants who cultivated hill rice and wet paddy. They are well known for their Organic. Their staple is rice cooked in banana leaves called Nuba Laya (Pudun, Nor & Chung, 2016). With the abundant rice available, the Lun Bawang has a unique way of preserving their foods with their rice. In the old day's wild game meat mostly, the wild board are preserved so that it can be to be consumed for a yearlong period. These meats are preserved due to unavailability of a refrigerator that can store the meats. In the older days, the meat is brined with organic spring salt and cooked rice and stored in hollowed bamboo stalk and buried in soil for a minimum of

one month. To date, this method is not practised among the newer generation of the Lun Bawang. Now the meats are kept in a container and placed in a darker area at a room temperature. This preserved food is known as senamu or fermented meat. The senamu is highly regarded as the finest cuisine from the Lun Bawang community as it is only served during important festivals and wedding ceremonies. The senamu is usually fried with sliced shallot, chopped garlic, Slice chilli and cooked to perfection. Ingredients include fresh game meat (wild boar meat commonly used), garlic, bird eye chilli, spring salt, and Adan-cooked rice.



Figure 3: Semamu'

Cut the meat into size bit, marinate the meat with salt and leave to room temperature to drain out the liquid from the meat approximately two hours. Once the meat is done, cooked rice will be added to the meat and once again salt will be added to the senamu, mixed thoroughly until the salt and rice are evenly mixed with the meat. The saltiness of the meat will depend on the individual. Once all this method is done, the senamu is to be stored in a glass container and kept under dark areas, which is not to be exposed to lights. This is to ensure the fermentation takes place. The senamu is ready to be consumed after a one-month process of fermentation.

4.5 Kompia

Kompia is well known among the local Chinese and other local community in Sarawak. Kompia was originated way back from especially Qi Ji Guang's soldiers during the anti-Japanese occupation war in China. To date, Kompia is consumed by all walks of life in Sarawak, and the Kompia is made and bakes the Foo Chow community, which most of them residing in the Central region of Sarawak is in Sibiu. Due to the distinctive taste that made this food very popular among the locals, this humble pastry Kompia was voted as the Sibiu signature food and most popular pastry items in 2010 with the Borneo Cultural Festival's conjunction. The ingredients include such as all purposes flour, water, salt, yeast, baking soda and sesame seed.



Figure 4: Kompia

Mixed the flour, baking soda and salt and to add some water to make a dough. The dough then to be cut into small pieces. The flour will be sprinkled on the small pieces of dough so that dough does not stick together. Each small piece is rolled to make it round shape and poked in the middle of the round dough to make a tiny hole. This dough can then be dust with sesame seed and be baked using traditional oven using charcoal for 10 minutes until it is golden and ready to be consumed. Best consumed with meat items such as char sio chicken or pork meat.

4.6 Suman Lemantak

Being the second-largest community in Sarawak after the Iban Community, Melayu Sarawak has abundant traditional food available across Sarawak's eating place. One of its unique delicacies is Suman Lemantak or prawn wrapped in mangrove palm leaves or Nipah leaves. The Malay community in Sarawak, commonly residing near the riverbank, makes the seafood one their essential source of protein. Suman Lemantak widely found in the Malay Community's interior part, especially in Kabong, Pusa, Meludam and Saratok. The Suman Lemantak has become one of the sought-after cuisines because it is hardly available during a typical day. The Suman Lemantak only available and served

during major festival and wedding ceremony. Ingredients include such as fresh river fish, cooked rice, sago flour and salt.



Figure 5: Lemantak

Wash the river Shrimp thoroughly, descale the prawn and remove the vein. Minced the prawn roughly and mixed the shrimp with the cooked rice and sago flour. Wrapped the mixture in a mangrove palm leaf. Bake it over open wood fire over low heat until there is no more water dripping from the Suman Lemantak and is ready to be served.

4.7 Cooking Process of Sarawak Ethnic Foods

Next question was "What are the cooking techniques for Sarawak ethnic foods?" This research question explores the cooking techniques for each menu, from the interview results, the fermentation process identified by the researcher using content analysis shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Taxonomy of Cooking Process Attributes

Dimension categories/ Total mentioned (%)	Menu	Items
Fermentation (100%)	1 - Umai 2 - Senamu	2
Total attributes		2

From the findings, it can be seen that the critical attribute of Sarawak ethnic foods as according to the informants is centred on its unique cooking process which is "simple and healthy" such as boiling, roasting on an open flame, baking and fermentation. Therefore, there is an opportunity to promote this finding in future promotional materials as "freshly made and healthy" and are confident that promoting the cooking process makes Sarawak ethnic foods less oily and no artificial heating agents such as microwave been utilised. Based on past studies, fermentation processes correlated with many health benefits given fermented foods contain healthy enzymes that produce biologically active peptides with enzymes such as proteinase and peptidase and remove some non-nutrient agents (Sanlier, Gökçen & Sezgin, 2019).

4.8 Cooking Techniques of Sarawak Ethnic Foods

Based on the findings, there are two types of cooking techniques mentioned by the informants: dry-heat cooking utilise air or fat has a rich flavour due to the caramelisation and browning of the foods. The moist-heat cooking technique uses water or steam and focuses mainly on its natural flavour and minimises the significant losses of water-soluble vitamins and increases the digestibility of protein—the two cooking techniques shown in table 2.

Table 2: Taxonomy of Cooking Technique Attributes

Dimension categories/Total mentioned (%)	Menu	Items
Dry-heat (100%)		1
Roasting on an open flame	1 - Suman Lemantak	
Dry-heat (83.33%)		1
Baking	1 - Kompia	
Moist-Heat (100%)		1
Boiling	1 – Ayam Pansuh	
Total attributes		3

The informants' statement that proved the dry heat cooking technique such as roasting and baking is much healthier than frying were:

a) I prefer to cook by roasting/baking because it does not need oil and much healthier than frying. (SB)

b) Cooking with open fire or roasting in English terms is better because the natural moisture is slowly evaporated, which may not need to fat. Because it doesn't need any added fat, it can be considered as "healthy" way of cooking. (RR)

4.9 Cooking Ingredients of Sarawak Ethnic Foods

The third question was "What are the cooking ingredients for Sarawak ethnic foods?". This research question aims to investigate the cooking ingredients for each menu. Summarising the informants' feedback, the local ingredients utilised in Sarawak ethnic foods are listed in table 3 with more than 80% in total mentioned by the informants' in the interview conducted. Besides, the researcher derived to the conclusion based on the informants' feedback that Sarawak's local ingredients are "varieties and available". One respondent noted that "because Sarawak does have varieties of supply for local ingredients, most of the ethnic families can cook the foods by themselves" (Informant SB). Some other respondents expressed that the ingredients are easy to find "the ingredients are available and easy to get from any markets and supermarket" (informant IM), "people can get it from a wet market for fresh ingredients such as lemongrass and turmeric leaf which easy to find" (informant EM, and "have many types of ingredients all year round depend on what you want" (Respondent TE). Thus, based on the informants' responses, most of the menu listed uses the local ingredients. Table 3 revealed the list of local ingredients for each menu, consisting of more than 80% of the total mentioned for each local ingredient.



Figure 6: Clockwise direction: Turmeric leaf, bird eye chilli, shallot, ginger, lemongrass, turmeric

Table 3: List of Ingredients used in the menus

Dimension categories/Total mentioned (%)	Menu	Items Coding
Lemongrass (100%)	Ayam Pansuh	1
Turmeric (83.33%)	Ayam Pansuh	1
Bird Eye Chilli (100%)	Ayam Pansuh	1
	Umai	2
	Senamu	3
Shallot (100%)	Umai	2
Local ginger (100%)	Ayam Pansuh	1
	Umai	2
Onion	Umai	2
Garlic	Senamu	3
Calamansi	Umai	2
Sago flour	Lemantak	4
Total Attributes		4

5 Conclusion

Based on Richards and Hjalager-Anne (2002) assertion, food, in particular, has been used to supporting identities because what we eat is the fundamental aspect of our culture. Thus, food is vital to reflect on one's culture and heritage identity (Ting et al., 2017). Therefore, we have concluded the standardisation of cooking methods for the Sarawak ethnic food recipe and explain well concerning the unique Sarawakian identity by adopting this present study. With the standardisation of cooking methods been recorded, the uniqueness of such ethnic food may be preserved as according to (Mohd et al., 2020), the knowledge of ethnic food is crucial especially for the young generation to retain and apply the traditional food for it will lose the existence of the cultural food if it is not maintained and apply accordingly.

In the past, ethnic food is consumed due to survival purposes, and whereas today, it is consumed for the appreciation of culture (Ting et al., 2017). Sarawak is the largest state in Malaysia with over 30 ethnics, or indigenous (Attila, 2007) has so much to offer in term of the tourism sector. As per the notion by Björk and Kauppinen-Räisänen (2014), ethnic food could be considered as the central to the tourist experience and an important tourist attraction. In Sarawak's perspective, it is vital to preserving ethnicity in food to future generations continuously. If there no action is taken, it will blemish each Sarawak present native's group culinary heritage. Hence, it directly affects state tourism as ethnic food in facts is a window of the Sarawak cultures' identity a pleasurable experience for tourists (Langgat et al., 2011). Therefore, as urbanisation is rapidly taking place, sooner or later, it might change the whole system from the way foods are prepared to the style they are served as it might indirectly impact the young and later generation. Thus, if this assumption is accurate, the young and later generation

might not know the traditional method and technique of preparing the dishes (Langgat et al., 2011) that has been the practice from generation to generation.

Although Sarawak is the largest state in Malaysia with more than 30 ethnic groups (Attila, 2007) have much to offer endlessly the availability of fresh local ingredients and richness of combination between flavour and sheer varieties which enables everyone who visited Sarawak would no doubt be amazed by the Sarawak ethnic foods. However, no doubt, there is a challenge to establish Sarawak's position as a world-class food tourism destination. This study implies that this research study could assist the government and non-governmental agencies or other interested tourism stakeholders in developing an effective marketing strategy portraying the richness and originality of Sarawak ethnic cuisines to its targeted market segments. Also, some Chef Association or education institution could organise while promoting Sarawak ethnic foods through cooking competition, demonstration, or even food fair to create awareness among the local citizen and foreign tourist.

6 Direction for further study

Thus, this study may help future chefs or people interested in exploring Sarawak ethnic food to certain with the cooking process, technique, and local ingredients utilised in the preparation process. Besides, those non-chefs or Sarawak food lovers would better explain in great details to the foreign culinary tourists' with confidently. Lastly, a mix-method study would help in a deeper understanding of the validation on Sarawak ethnic foods cooking process, techniques and ingredients used because it will have covered from both research methodologies toward the certainty and confirmatory with the research findings

7 About the author

Christopher Wan Sageng is an Asst. Professor at UCSI University Sarawak Campus, Faculty of Hospitality & Tourism Management. Currently, he is also holding the portfolio of Deputy Dean for the faculty. He has been actively involving himself in various culinary and hospitality related competition and event. Malaysia-based telecommunication provider has entrusted him with his cooking show entitled "Suduk Cerpu" with his enthusiastic and charisma.

Mark Kasa is an Asst. Professor at UCSI University Sarawak Campus, Faculty of Hospitality & Tourism Management. PhD in Human Resource Development from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak has published more than 20 papers (Journals and proceeding) in human resource development, flow experience, emotional intelligence, transfer of training, and work-life balance. Has over ten years of working experience in the hotel industry (Room Division) in a few renowned hotel brands in Malaysia and internationally.

Joseph Martin Pudun is an Asst. Professor at UCSI University Sarawak Campus, Faculty of Hospitality & Tourism Management. Currently, holding the portfolio of Head

of Department for Culinary. Won several awards in several cooking competitions locally and international level—culinary interest mainly on local Sarawakian cuisine and enthusiast to promote Sarawak Food to global era.

Nursyafiqah Ramli is a Lecturer in UCSI University Kuala Lumpur Campus, Faculty of Hospitality & Tourism Management. Currently, holding the portfolio of Head of Department for Postgraduate.

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